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UNCLAS CALCUTTA 000107

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS AND INR

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMED IN JHARKHAND -- TWO WEEKS LATER

REF: A) NEW DELHI 1519, B) NEW DELHI 1304, C) CALCUTTA 072

1. On March 15 the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by Arjun Munda of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won a vote of confidence on the floor of the Jharkhand Assembly, thereby establishing its governing majority. Munda had been Chief Minister prior to the elections and resumed the post on March 12, after Shibu Soren of the Jharkhand Mughti Morcha (JMM) could not win a vote of confidence in the Assembly as directed by the Supreme Court. This brings an end to two weeks of post-election frenzied politicking that had propelled Jharkhand into the national spotlight. The NDA's majority, however, is razor-thin and Munda's government is likely to be fragile.

2. The NDA margin was 40-37, with four MLA's not voting from the 81-member Assembly. One non-voter was the Speaker, Inder Singh Namdhari of the NDA, who was elected just prior to the vote of confidence, and who only votes in cases of a tie. The other three included Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) member Kamlesh Singh, who was a minister in Shibu Soren's short-lived government and is now a minister in Munda's government. Kamlesh has spent the last several days in and out of the hospital alleging cardiac problems while conveniently avoiding having to violate party discipline by voting for the NDA. Of the other two missing MLAs, independent Joba Manjhi may also be contemplating crossing the aisle to the NDA, but Sukhram Oraon (JMM) would not have that option due to the May 2004 anti-defection act.

3. COMMENT. Munda has successfully formed a government, but he may find actual governance a daunting task. For one thing, government ministries are the much-coveted political spoils of victory, but a recent national policy allows Jharkhand to have only 12 ministers (15 percent of 81). All five of the independents who joined the NDA have been rewarded with ministries as, apparently, has Kamlesh Singh. Add to that Chief Minister Munda and only five slots remain for the faithful long-time MLA's of the core governing coalition, the BJP and Janata Dal (United) or JDU. Those passed over are likely to be restive and resentful of the come-latelies unless Munda manages the coalition very skillfully. END COMMENT.

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